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# **FROM ISLAMIC REFORM TO MUSLIM ACTIVISM: THE EVOLUTION OF AN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY IN KENYA**

**NGALA CHOME<sup>1</sup>**

## **ABSTRACT**

Models explaining Islamist politics in Kenya examine an interplay of socio-economic conditions and psychosocial factors, but rarely account for the evolution of an Islamist ideology in Kenya's public discourse. This article traces Islamist ideas within a longer history of Muslim politics. Specifically, the origins of Islamist ideas are placed within internal debates amongst the minority Muslim population of Kenya – and debates between Muslims and the state and Muslims and the wider Christian public – regarding how to improve the Muslim condition in a Christian-dominated country. The immediate background for the emergence of Islamist ideas is then discussed through an examination of trends since the 1990s: increased contestations of religious and political authority, and responses to Muslim activism by the state and the wider Christian public. The article concludes that Islamist politics – in Kenya and elsewhere – are more often than not a result of local histories as much as they are part of a global Muslim 'victimization' narrative.

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Since late 2011, Kenya has been attacked by Somalia based Islamist organization, Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahedeen, most commonly known as Al-Shabaab, ostensibly for retaliation of its contribution of forces to the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM).<sup>2</sup> Evidence has shown that some Kenyan nationals are mobilizing support for this kind of Islamist violence, including recruiting their co-nationals to join Al-Shabaab and other Islamist organisations, and as a result, perpetrating most of the violence associated with the group within Kenya's borders.<sup>3</sup> Given this

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<sup>2</sup> David Anderson and Jacob McKnight, 'Kenya at war: Al-Shabaab and its enemies in Eastern Africa', *African Affairs* 114, 454 (2014), pp. 1-27.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations, 'Letter dated 18 July 2011 from the Chairman of the Security Council Committee pursuant to resolutions 751 (1992) and 1907 (2009) concerning Somalia and Eritrea addressed to the President of the Security Council' (UN report, New York, U.S., 2011), pp. 135-179.

background – of Kenyans participating in Islamist violence – what explains an increased invocation in Kenya’s recent history of an Islamist ideology in the country’s public discourse?

Studies on the politics of Kenya’s minority Muslim population have analyzed – at great length – the debates around participation and citizenship that Kenyan Muslims have engaged amongst themselves and with the state since the colonial decades.<sup>4</sup> While these studies make only passing reference to Islamist politics, those that do not focus their attention on state responses to Islamist violence at one level, and the role of a narrative of Muslim marginalization in driving Islamist violence on another.<sup>5</sup>

The limitations of this literature – given the fact that many who are affected by marginalization do not, in fact, resort to violence, and that it is often unclear that those among them who do are motivated primarily by this condition – have been noted by an emerging field of study that examines an interplay of socio-economic conditions and psychosocial factors.<sup>6</sup> In this field, which is associated with a newly-established broad programme for policy intervention commonly referred to as ‘Countering Violent Extremism’ (CVE), the conclusion is that socioeconomic conditions, such as the exclusion of Muslim interests, may provide substantial explanations for support for Islamist violence in any given location, but that there is also a very strong case that they can only poorly explain behaviours that contribute to such violence.<sup>7</sup>

These studies notwithstanding, few account for the increased invocation of Islamist ideas in Kenya’s public discourse in the recent past. This article outlines the historical evolution of Islamist ideas by drawing upon studies that place Islamism within a wider history of Muslim politics, i.e. the history of religious reform and the modernization of Muslim public life, including struggles to

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<sup>4</sup> Hassan Ndzovu, *Muslims in Kenyan politics: political involvement, marginalization, and minority status* (Northwestern University Press, Illinois, 2014); Mohamed Bakari, ‘A place at the table: the political integration of Muslims in Kenya, 1963-2007’, *Islamic Africa* 4, 1 (2013), pp. 15-48; Kai Kresse, ‘Muslim politics in post-colonial Kenya: negotiating knowledge on the double periphery’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15, 1 (2009), pp. 76-94; Arye Oded, *Islam and politics in Kenya* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, London, 2000); Mohamed Bakari and Saad Yahya (eds), *Islam in Kenya: proceedings of the national seminar on contemporary Islam in Kenya* (MEWA, Mombasa, 1995), pp. 168-193; Abdulaziz Lodhi, ‘Muslims in eastern Africa: their past and present’, *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 31, 1 (1994), pp. 88-98; Donal B. Cruise O’Brien, *Symbolic confrontations: Muslims imagining the state in Africa* (Hurst, London, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Peter Kagwanja, ‘Counter-terrorism in the Horn of Africa: new security frontiers, old strategies’, *African Security Review* 15, 3 (2006), pp. 72-86; Jeremy Prestholdt, ‘Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism’, *Africa Today* 57, 4 (2011), pp. 3-27; David Anderson and Jacob McKnight, ‘Understanding Al-Shabaab: clan, Islam and insurgency in Kenya’, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 9, 3 (2015), 536-557; Jeremy Lind, Patrick Mutahi and Marjoke Oosterom, ‘Killing a mosquito with a hammer: Al-Shabaab violence and state security responses in Kenya’, *Peacebuilding* 5, 2 (2017), pp. 118-135.

<sup>6</sup> Guilain Denoeux and Lynn Carter, *Guide to drivers of violent extremism*, (United States Agency for International Development, Washington D.C, February, 2009); Anneli Botha, ‘Political socialization and terrorist radicalization among individuals who joined Al-Shabaab in Kenya’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37, 11 (2014), pp. 895-919; Anneli Botha, *Terrorism in Kenya and Uganda: radicalization from a political socialization perspective*, (Lexington, London, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> James Khalil, ‘Radical beliefs and violent actions are not synonymous: how to place the key disjuncture between attitudes and behaviours at the heart of our research into political violence’, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, 2 (2014), pp. 204-206; James Khalil and Martine Zuethen, ‘Countering violent extremism and risk reduction: a guide to program design and evaluation, (RUSI Whitehall Report, Royal United Services Institute, London, 2016).

articulate a common political agenda for Kenya's minority population of Muslims.<sup>8</sup> While the article pays attention to historical debates within the Muslim population of Kenya regarding how to address the Muslim condition, it locates the increased invocation of Islamist ideas in public discourse from wider trends since the 1990s, i.e. increased contestations of religious and political authority, and responses to Muslim activism by the state and the wider Christian public.

The historical and qualitative methodological approach involved key informant interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). Respondents – selected for the purposes of two separate, but related studies – were drawn from neighborhoods and counties that, after a synthesis of media, government, and civil society reports, were determined to have had greater experiences with Islamist mobilization in the recent past. The interviews and FGDs – involving religious leaders and clerics, village elders, women and youth activists, administration officials, officials of county governments, local politicians, and academics – were conducted in Mombasa and Nairobi during the months of September and November 2015, and in Northeast Kenya (Garisa, Wajir and Mandera) in April 2016. The selection process was based on purposive sampling, where respondents with a direct or indirect experience of Islamist mobilization, state responses to Islamist mobilization, and involvement in community activism, were selected. In total, 120 semi-qualitative interviews were conducted in Mombasa and Nairobi, and an additional 25 in Northeast Kenya. While the names of participants are anonymized, some, like administration and county government officials, represented state perspectives, whilst others were closely aligned with Kenya's Muslim and Christian population. This empirical data was triangulated with secondary literature, including existing academic literature, newspaper, government, and non-governmental reports.

The next section provides a framework for understanding Islamist ideas within wider trends in Muslim politics, while the second discusses Muslim politics in Kenya before 1990, with a focus on Muslim internal debates about reform and modernization. The third and fourth sections of the article each discuss the specific trends since the 1990s that occasioned an increased invocation of Islamist ideas in public discourse. The article ends with a few concluding remarks.

### *Muslim politics and the emergence of Islamist ideas*

Following Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, Muslim politics are understood here to 'constitute the field upon which an intricate pattern of cooperation and contest over form, practice, and interpretation takes place'.<sup>9</sup> In this way, the distinct character of Muslim politics – as many scholars of the Islamic intellectual tradition would contend – is the constitution of a discursive field where ideas about proper religious practice are constantly debated, negotiated, or mediated

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<sup>8</sup> Hassan Mwakimako and Justin Willis, *Islam, politics and violence on the Kenya coast*, (Observatoire des Enjeux Politiques et Securitaires das la Corne de l'Afrique, Bourdieu, 2014) ; Gregory Deacon, George Gona, Hassan Mwakimako, and Justin Willis, 'Preaching politics : Islam and Christianity on the Kenya coast', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 35, 2 (2017), pp. 148-167.

<sup>9</sup> Dale Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim politics* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 1996).

according to specific geographical and historical contexts.<sup>10</sup> In the same lines as those suggested by Eickelman and Piscatori, Fazlur Rahman has argued that the advent of Islamist ideas was occasioned by contending visions amongst Muslims regarding how to develop a distinctively modernist Muslim civil politics, especially after the dissolution of the Caliphate of Constantinople in 1924, which had symbolized the union of Islamic belief and politics for a number of centuries.<sup>11</sup> In a nutshell, ‘Islamism’ involves the wide range of attempts – violent and non-violent – that seek a revival of Islam’s political legacy.<sup>12</sup> In this way, the central assumption driving Islamist politics is that the restoration of the Islamic state would serve as a ‘cure for all’ solution to what some regard as improper Islamic religious practice, or *bida*, and through which the commonly felt global sense of Muslim powerlessness would be addressed.<sup>13</sup>

These approaches, therefore, suggest that Islamists seek to articulate a political vision, but also, are driven by the need to reform Islamic practice, i.e. by rejecting syncretism, or Islamic innovation. While some Islamists have attempted to advance their political vision through modern instruments such as the formation of political parties, participating in elections and joining modern governments, a seemingly minority group of Islamists has rejected secularization, nationalism and socialism, and has pursued an anti-democratic, anti-Western, and more often than not, violent strategy so as to restore an Islamic state.<sup>14</sup> In addition, the discursive commitment of the latter to Sharia and other classical Islamic traditions is related to their strong allegiance to *takfiri*, i.e. the authority to declare other Muslims as ‘non-believing’, or ‘non-Muslims’ – an authority that many Muslims contend can only be claimed by God – and therefore designating them as targets of ‘holy war’.<sup>15</sup> These Islamists – the subjects of this article – are committed to a conservative literalism, i.e. following classical Islamic texts without modification, and are opposed to the idea of self-judgement (*ijtihad*).<sup>16</sup> This ideology finds origin in influential strands of Islamic political thought during the twentieth century, i.e. in the early ideas of the Egyptian Muslim brothers, and in particular, those of Abu al-A’la Mawdoodi (1903-1979) and Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Talal Asad, *The idea of an anthropology of Islam* (Occasional paper series, Center for contemporary Arab studies, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C, 1986); Muhammad Kassim Zaman, *The Ulama in contemporary Islam: custodians of change* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J, 2002); Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the political discourse of modernity* (Ithaca Press, Reading, New Edition, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and modernity: transformation of an intellectual tradition* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> Hendrik Hansen and Peter Kainz, ‘Radical Islamism and totalitarian ideology: a comparison of Sayyid Qutb’s Islamism with Marxism and national socialism,’ *Totalitarian movements and political religions* 8, 1, (2007), pp. 55-76.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Woltering, ‘The roots of Islamist popularity,’ *Third World Quarterly* 23, 6 (2002), pp. 1134-1136; Mehdi Mozaffari, ‘What is Islamism? History and definition of a concept,’ *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, 1 (2007), pp. 17-33.

<sup>14</sup> Hansen and Peter Kainz, ‘Radical Islamism’, p. 56.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Bale, ‘Islamism and totalitarianism,’ *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, 2, (2009), pp. 73-96; Alex de Waal (Ed.), *Islamism and its enemies in the Horn of Africa*, (Hurst, London, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> de Waal (Ed.), *Islamism*, p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> Hamid Enayat, *Modern Islamic political thought* (University of Texas Press, Austin, TX, 1982); John Calvert, *Sayyid Qutb and the origins of radical Islamism* (Hurst, London, 2010).

Similar to Muslims elsewhere, Muslims in Kenya have engaged with global Islamic discourses as a way of talking about Islamic reform, but to also wind ideas about reform (or debates about proper religious practice) together with wider political agendas.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, Kenyan Islamic practice, which is predominantly Sunni with a Shafi intellectual tradition, consists of a number of varying interpretations, especially a form of Islam with a longer history that consists of a bundle of syncretic religious practices widely referred to as Sufi, and newer forms of reformist Islam commonly referred to as Wahhabist (or Salafist) that are opposed to Sufi practices.<sup>19</sup> In this way, Muslim politics in Kenya revolves around struggles to rid Islamic practice of Sufi innovation, and to wind these ideas with wider political and social reform agendas, especially, the articulation of a common agenda for the country's minority Muslim population.<sup>20</sup>

The context under which these struggles have evolved over time has been provided by a wider democratisation of claims to Islamic knowledge – where more individuals, not just traditional religious scholars, have come to have a say on how to be a Muslim and live a good life – and the wider ramifications of the advance of Western culture, which is perceived to have expanded at the expense of Islamic civilizations.<sup>21</sup> Important to note is that the diverse (and increasingly political) invocations of Islam, not only by religious scholars, clerics and preachers, but also by Muslim professionals, students, activists, women, and disenfranchised youth – all in an effort to contribute to civic debate and public life – have complicated wider agendas that seek a unification of the minority Muslim population of Kenya.<sup>22</sup> While this feature may derive from the diversity of Kenya's population of Muslims along ethnic, race, class and geographical lines, it is also the result of Islam's propensity to 'lend itself to multiple interpretations'.<sup>23</sup>

As a result, as many Muslims encourage Muslim participation in the formal political process, others have rejected the modern state, elections and democracy, claiming that, in addition to providing the means through which Muslim marginalization has been forged, these processes and institutions are also un-Islamic.<sup>24</sup> In other words, while some Muslims present Muslim concerns as synonymous with broader agendas of human rights and democracy, others have drawn parallels between Kenyan Muslim grievances and wider global narratives of Muslim persecution, locating the solution to Muslim grievances in Islamist strategies that seek an overthrow of the current international system. While these differences in Muslim public opinion have (since the 1990s) been hardened by responses to Muslim activism by the state and the wider Christian public, it is this article's basic premise that they grew out of internal debates amongst the minority Muslim

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<sup>18</sup> Mwakimako and Willis, *Islam, politics and violence*.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Kresse, 'Muslim politics'.

<sup>21</sup> Zaman, *The Ulama*.

<sup>22</sup> Hassan Mwakimako and Justin Willis, 'Islam and democracy: debating electoral involvement on the Kenya coast', *Islamic Africa* 7, 1 (2015), pp. 19-43.

<sup>23</sup> John Esposito and James Piscatori, 'Democratization and Islam' *Middle East Journal* 45, 3 (1991), pp. 427-440.

<sup>24</sup> Mwakimako and Willis, 'Islam and democracy', p. 30.

population regarding Islamic reform and modernization, or struggles to create the right conditions for the minority Muslim population of Kenya.

### *Muslim politics in Kenya before 1990*

The predominance of the Shafi intellectual school in Kenyan Islam (through which Sufi practices have been anchored), is the result of the work of Islamic proselytizers from the Hadhramaut region of modern-day Southern Yemen – they migrated across East Africa and its offshore islands, especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Islamizing significant parts of the hinterland of what became Somalia, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and parts of Central Africa.<sup>25</sup> These Sufi-Shafi scholars and preachers (most claimed status as direct descendants of the Prophet Muhammad) used their social status to establish an early system of Quranic schools and mosques where they taught Islam through a pedagogy of recitation, repetition, and memorization.<sup>26</sup> A series of rituals, like the celebration of the prophet's birthday, communal prayer processions to offer protection from 'evil spirits', and veneration of men claiming to be descendants of the prophet, grew around a system that entrenched the role of the Shafi clerics (or 'local saints') as mediators between East African Muslims and Islamic knowledge and practice.<sup>27</sup>

These traditional religious scholars provided an uncontested Muslim leadership in Kenya for a considerable period of time, however, challenges to their hegemony have been issued, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, albeit with varying degrees of success. Initially, challenges to the authority of traditional Shafi-Sufi scholars emanated from wider Muslim reactions to the threat of colonial rule to Islamic culture, which took on a form of religious renewal that begun placing greater emphasis on the basic tenets of Islam and the figure of the prophet. Sheikh Al-Amin Ali Mazrui (1891-1947) of Mombasa was the first prominent Muslim who sought a reformation of existing Islamic practices in Kenya, and rejected popular traditions that had become associated with the local brand of Islam.<sup>28</sup> His intellectual campaign – published through weekly newsletters circulated in Mombasa in the 1920s and 1930s – was an attempt to provide the responses for East African Muslims to follow under the context of the advance of Western culture.<sup>29</sup>

Similar to Islamic reformers in other parts of the Muslim world, Sheikh Mazrui sought a return to the roots of Islam for guidance, and the application of the Islamic concept of self-judgement, or

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<sup>25</sup> Randall Pouwels, *Horn and Crescent: cultural change and traditional Islam on the East African coast* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>26</sup> Mohamed Bakari, 'The new Ulama in Kenya', in Mohamed Bakari and Saad Yahya (eds), *Islam in Kenya: proceedings of the national seminar on contemporary Islam in Kenya* (MEWA, Mombasa, 1995), pp. 168-193.

<sup>27</sup> David Parkin and Stephen Headley (eds), *Islamic prayer across the Indian Ocean: inside and outside the mosque* (Routledge, Oxford, 2000); Kadara Swaleh, 'The demise of religio-cultural heritage of the Swahili people of Kenya', in Rocha Chimera, Mohamed Karama, Ahmed Hussein, Khalid Omar (eds), *Kiswahili research and development in Eastern Africa* (National Museums of Kenya, Mombasa, 2011), pp. 322-338.

<sup>28</sup> Randall Pouwels, 'Sh. Al-Amin B. Ali Mazrui and the Islamic Modernism in East Africa', 1875-1947, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13, 3 (1981), pp. 329-345.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

interpretation of classical texts (*ijtihad*), so as to advance Muslim interests (*maslaha*) in the modern context.<sup>30</sup> In this early attempt at reforming existing Islamic practice and modernizing Muslim public life, Sheikh Mazrui discouraged what he saw as the ‘blind’ following of religious innovation that was inherent in the veneration of traditional Islamic scholars and instead, asked Muslims to appropriate models of Western civilization (such as secular education) without veering away from fundamental Islamic teachings.<sup>31</sup> While his emphasis on the Quran and the traditions of the Prophet, i.e. the *Hadith* and the *Sunna*, was an affront to the hegemony of traditional Sufi-Shafi scholars, his campaign for modernization of Islamic life was a way to prepare Muslims to compete favorably with Western-educated Christians. Failure to appropriate secular education (and hence the skills required in a modern state), Sheikh Mazrui opined, would serve to alienate Muslims in future.<sup>32</sup>

Sheikh Mazrui’s reform agenda, including his ‘prophecy’ of an imminent ‘up-country’ and predominantly Christian hegemony in years to come, largely went unheeded, in fact, it drew outright condemnation from members of the numerically larger Swahili community.<sup>33</sup> These struggles over religious leadership, especially in coastal communities, reflected wider struggles of identity at the time. Sheikh Mazrui was a member of Mombasa’s old Arab upper class, which had traditionally avoided marriages with non-Arab families and as such, was perceived to have had little interest in local customs and social arrangements.<sup>34</sup> Local Muslim opposition to Sheikh Mazrui’s intellectual campaign against local traditions and his Pan-Arab ideals were seen to have been a consequence of a racial-hierarchy that had had a long history by the time the British arrived on the East African coast.<sup>35</sup> Despite this, Sheikh Mazrui’s ideas would re-emerge under a post-colonial context of ‘up-country’ Christian hegemony and a Muslim retreat from Kenya’s public life.

Two distinctively Muslim political agendas – one for coastal autonomy, and another for the predominantly Somali and Muslim-dominated Northern Frontier District that borders Somalia to join, not an independent Kenya, but a ‘Greater Somalia’ – were made, and then rejected, at the dawn of Kenya’s independence in the early 1960s.<sup>36</sup> Despite some concessions, such as the post-colonial constitutional recognition of Kadhis’ courts that had had legal recognition since 1895, these proposals revealed, quite early enough, Muslim anxieties regarding their inclusion into a state that was considered ‘secular only in a nominal sense, with a political culture that is largely

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Bakari, ‘The new Ulama’, pp. 173

<sup>32</sup> Pouwels, ‘Sh. Al-Amin B. Ali Mazrui’, pp. 340.

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Kenya coast based public intellectual, Mombasa, Kenya, 24 February 2017; Interview, Lecturer, Pwani University and Lamu resident, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 September, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Pouwels, ‘Sh. Al-Amin B. Ali Mazrui’, pp. 335.

<sup>35</sup> Jonathan Glassman, *Feasts and riot: revelry, rebellion and popular consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (Heinemann, Portsmouth, 1995).

<sup>36</sup> Hannah Whittaker, *Insurgency and counterinsurgency in Kenya: a social history of the Shifta conflict, 1963-1968* (Brill, Leiden, 2015); James Brennan, ‘Lowering the Sultan’s flag: sovereignty and decolonization in coastal Kenya’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 50, 4 (2008), pp. 831-861.



infused with Christian language and imagery'.<sup>37</sup> In addition, with the defeat of these proposals and the hegemonic status of 'up-country', Christian and Western-educated elites that followed, struggles for Islamic reform and modernization continued. A more assertive group of reformist scholars and preachers emerged in the years after Kenyan independence.<sup>38</sup>

Initially, this group was influenced by the teachings of Sheikh Abdallah Saleh Al-Farsy (1912-1982), the first post-colonial Chief Kadhi, who had been Sheikh Mazrui's Islamic student.<sup>39</sup> These reformers, notably Harith Swaleh, Nassor Khamis, Mahmoud Msallam and Ali Shee, continued the campaign to reform Islamic practice and modernize Muslim public life.<sup>40</sup> Similar to Sheikh Mazrui's reformist and modernist campaign during the colonial period, these men – and they were all men – presented reform and modernization as a response to the post-colonial socioeconomic marginality of Kenyan Muslims.<sup>41</sup> The efforts of these men would be expanded by the return to Kenya of graduates who had received scholarships to join leading centers of Islamic study in the Muslim world, in particular, Saudi-Arabia, Libya, Egypt and the Sudan – a trend that spiked from 1979, the year of the Iranian revolution.<sup>42</sup>

Taking advantage of increasing Saudi-Arabian patronage (which increased so as to wade off Iran's global ambitions, e.g. in spreading Shiism), Kenya's young Muslims were gradually exposed to Islamic reformist ideas by influential Muslim thinkers, becoming particularly enamored by the ideological currents circulating in the Muslim world at the time, and especially, by a puritanical brand (Wahhabism) that was widely professed in Saudi-Arabia. On their return to Kenya during the 1980s, most of them continued to propagate these ideas.<sup>43</sup> Their claims to scholarship did not only give them – young Muslims from a diverse ethnic, regional and racial background – social mobility, as some improved their economic status as a result, but it also gave them status and influence as imams and teachers.<sup>44</sup>

Their return also coincided with the establishment of a dense trans-local network of Islamic charities, study groups, and Muslim youth associations, which meant that internal Muslim debates about proper religious practice, akin to John Lonsdale's debates about 'moral ethnicity and civic

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<sup>37</sup> Mwakimako and Willis, *Islam, politics and violence*, pp. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Interview, a Human rights activist and a retired education officer, Garisa, Kenya, 14 April 2016 ; Kresse, 'Muslim politics'.

<sup>39</sup> Bakari, 'The new Ulama', pp. 182.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Lecturer, Pwani University and Lamu resident, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 September, 2015;

Bakari, 'The new Ulama', pp. 190.

<sup>42</sup> Abdin Chande, 'Radicalism and reform in East Africa', in Nehemiah Levtzion and Randall Pouwels (eds), *The history of Islam in Africa*, (James Currey, Oxford, 2000), pp. 349-372.

<sup>43</sup> Bakari, 'The new Ulama', pp. 175.

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Quranic-school teacher, Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya, 15 September 2015; Interview, Islamic preacher, Pumwani, Nairobi, Kenya, 19 September 2015; Interview, official of Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), Mombasa, Kenya, 24 November, 2015.

virtue', would become much more public and fierce in the late 1980s.<sup>45</sup> Given that Kenya was headed towards the politically turbulent years of the 1990s, established authority would therefore receive increasing challenges from the wider Muslim public in the years that followed.<sup>46</sup>

### *Contesting religious and political authority since the 1990s*

Muslim public opinion in the early part of the 1990s was dominated by questions around the establishment (and consequent denial of registration) of the Islamic Party of Kenya (IPK).<sup>47</sup> Despite the party's claims to representing the concerns of a religious minority, the list of grievances they presented was distinctively secular: low representation of Muslims in government, Muslim discrimination by government institutions, low government investment in education and infrastructure in predominantly Muslim areas, amongst others.<sup>48</sup> The proposal to establish the IPK had itself arrived on the backdrop of the repeal of Section 2A of Kenya's former constitution, after which multiple parties other than the ruling one were allowed registration so as to contest in general-elections.

However, the proposal was rejected by the government, which cited the party's religious character as a problem. Despite the refusal for registration, the wider context of political liberalization within which the party had been formed occasioned a wider increase in public invocations of Islam, which would be made in the years ahead not only by religious scholars and preachers, but by the wider Muslim public.<sup>49</sup> The kind of Muslim activism that followed meant that the 'Muslim question', which had largely been muted since the independence years, reemerged in the 1990s as Muslims began to organize more assertively as 'Muslims' in the public arena.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, a national Muslim organization had been formed in 1973, called the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims, or SUPKEM. But SUPKEM was mostly known for its close relationship with ruling regimes, and the organization was encouraging Muslims, in the 1970s and 1980s, to be loyal

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<sup>45</sup> John Lonsdale, 'The Moral Economy of the Mau Mau: wealth, poverty and virtue in Kikuyu political thought,' in John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman (eds) *Unhappy valley: conflict in Kenya and Africa*, (London: James Currey), pp. 265-504.

<sup>46</sup> FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Pumwani, Nairobi, Kenya, 23 June 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Arye Oded, 'Islamic extremism in Kenya: the rise and fall of Sheikh Khalid Balala', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 26, 4, (1996), pp. 406-415.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Interview, youth activist, Eastleigh, Nairobi, 7 September 2015; Interview, gender activist, Majengo, Mombasa, 7 September 2015; Interview, county government official, youth activist and 2 university students, Garisa, Kenya, 16 April 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Interview, Islamic preacher, Mombasa, 15 November 2015; Interview, Human rights activist focussing on Muslim rights, Mombasa, 25 November, 2015; Interview, Lecturer, Pwani University and Lamu resident, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 September, 2015; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; Sara Thorsden, *New Muslim activism in Kenya*, (Aarhus University, unpublished M.A dissertation, 2009).

to the authorities, and to separate religion from politics.<sup>51</sup> While these views would continue into the 1990s, challenges to SUPKEM's claims for Muslim leadership grew.<sup>52</sup> In numerous 'letters to editors' and opinion articles published in Kenya's increasingly assertive newspapers, various individuals claiming to be representing particular strands of Muslim opinion accused SUPKEM's leadership of corruption, self-aggrandizement, and for failing to unite Kenyan Muslims.<sup>53</sup> The opposition to SUPKEM, best exemplified by supporters of the unregistered IPK, reflected a wider opposition to the religious and political establishment within the Muslim population of Kenya, especially the office of the Chief Kadhi and other prominent Muslims, including Muslim politicians at the time.<sup>54</sup>

As it became apparent that SUPKEM had lost significant monopoly in speaking on behalf of Kenyan Muslims, multiple Muslim voices emerged to claim the space within the public arena for debating the Muslim condition in Kenya. The growth of these multiple voices, and the need to articulate a distinctively Muslim political agenda in Kenyan politics, had not only been informed by the perceived failures of SUPKEM and other religious authorities, but had also been given renewed force by the social consequences of economic liberalization in the 1990s.<sup>55</sup> Since independence, the minority Muslim population of Kenya had been distant from institutions of power and influence, but the cultural remoteness of the state was deepened by socioeconomic changes that affected the neighborhoods of Mombasa and Nairobi, and across Muslim-dominated Northeast Kenya in the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> For instance, the decade saw the largest rural-urban migration in Kenya's post-colonial history, which was then followed by a collapse of the formal economy and a decline or disappearance of public social services.<sup>57</sup> A trend of internal migration accompanied a rise in social, economic and political violence, as individuals and groups struggled in defence of economic position against each other at one level, and against local government institutions at another.<sup>58</sup> Take Mombasa for example, Kenya's largest predominantly Muslim urban centre by

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<sup>51</sup> For example, *Daily Nation*, 'The speech of Kassim Mwamzandi', 7 April 1980; *British Broadcasting Corporation*, 'The speech of Supkem's secretary, Mohamed Amana in Summary of World Broadcasts,' 5 May 1987; *The Standard*, 'Chief Kadhi's call during the Supkem conference,' 11 June 1979.

<sup>52</sup> Ndlovu, *Muslims in Kenyan politics*, pp. 82; Oded, *Islam and politics*, pp. 22.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> For example, *Daily Nation*, 'The day Mombasa lost its island of peace title', 24 May 1992, p. 4; *Daily Nation*, 'IPK condemned as it threatens to burn Nassir', 7 May 1992, p. 20; *Daily Nation*, 'Rift Valley Muslims against Islamic party', 10 June 1992, p. 32; *Daily Nation*, 'Its total war, vows IPK', 21 June 1992, p. 1; *Daily Nation*, 'Koran tutors tell off IPK activist', 7 July 1992, p. 1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Musambayi Katumanga, 'A city under siege: banditry and forms of accumulation in Nairobi, 1991-2004', *Review of African Political Economy* 32, 106 (2005), pp. 505-520; Winnie Mitullah, 'A Case Study on Nairobi', in *Global Report on Human Settlements: The Challenge of Slums*: (Earthscan, London, 2003).

<sup>56</sup> Ken Menkhaus, 'The rise of a mediated state in Northern Kenya', *Afrika Focus*, 21, 2, (2008), pp. 23-38; Alamin Mazrui, 'Kayas of deprivation, Kayas of blood: violence, ethnicity, and the state in coastal Kenya' (Report, Kenya Human Rights Commission, Nairobi, 1997); Katumanga, 'A city under siege'.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, official of the county anti-radicalisation bureau, Wajir County, Kenya, 18 April 2016; Interview, gender activist, Majengo, Mombasa, 7 September 2015.

<sup>58</sup> FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Pumwani, Nairobi, Kenya, 23 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Likoni, Mombasa, Kenya, 29 June 2016.

1990. It's population of Muslims was quickly surpassed by that of 'non-coastal' Christians in the years that followed, and many years later, a poll would indicate that Mombasa comprised 40% Muslims and 60% Christians.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the increased informalization of public authority that accompanied these socioeconomic changes – which gave advantage to politically-connected individuals – Muslims became increasingly aware and concerned about their marginal status in Kenya after 1990.<sup>60</sup> The result was a more assertive Muslim activism, which also saw a further deepening of divisions amongst Muslims regarding how to address the Muslim predicament.<sup>61</sup>

In particular, the government's refusal to register the IPK – ostensibly formed to offer a political solution to the socioeconomic conditions affecting Muslims – led to the registration of multiple Muslim organisations, all seeking to mobilize the Muslim voice in Kenya.<sup>62</sup> However, these organizations, such as the Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), the Muslim Consultative Council (MCC), and Muslims for Human Rights (MUHURI), amongst others, immediately appeared to have much of an informal character, with affiliations to a variety of foreign donors, personal rivalries and mutual non-communication.<sup>63</sup> While the establishment, from 1997 (the year of IPK's decisive demise) of most of these organizations is reflective of wider social cleavages running through the minority Muslim population of Kenya, the organizations appeared to be supporting a broad agenda that encouraged Muslim participation in the formal political process, which they argued was the most appropriate strategy to create the right conditions for the Muslims of Kenya.<sup>64</sup>

In addition to these organisations, and emerging from a similar political context of liberalization in the 1990s, were activists who chose to cast the Muslim condition of Kenya as part of a global systematic alienation of Muslim interests.<sup>65</sup> For these individuals, the lack of a formal political platform in Kenya led to a turn to an expanding, yet informal discursive space through which they would debate issues affecting the Muslim public, or the *Ummah*.<sup>66</sup> In this space – which involved new communication media and mosque platforms – many people got the opportunity to talk about Muslim concerns, including those who were not necessarily educated in Islamic theology.<sup>67</sup> As a

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<sup>59</sup> Tom Wolf, Samuel Muthoka and Margaret Ireri, 'Kenya Coast Survey: development, marginalization, security and participation,' (Report, Ipsos Public Affairs, Nairobi, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> Interview, Islamic preacher, Mombasa, 15 November 2015; Interview, Human rights activist focussing on Muslim rights, Mombasa, 25 November, 2015; Interview, Lecturer, Pwani University and Lamu resident, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 September, 2015.

<sup>61</sup> FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Pumwani, Nairobi, Kenya, 23 June 2016.

<sup>62</sup> *Daily Nation*, 'IPK calls for dissolution of Muslim council', 22 February 1993, p. 5; Thordsen, *New Muslim activism*.

<sup>63</sup> Cruise O'Brien, *Symbolic confrontations*.

<sup>64</sup> Interview, executive official of National Muslims Leadership Forum (NAMLEF), 7 April 2016; Mwakimako and Willis, 'Islam and democracy'.

<sup>65</sup> Jeffrey Haynes, 'Islam and democracy in East Africa', *Democratization*, 13, 3, (2006), pp. 490-507.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, official of Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), Mombasa, Kenya, 24 November, 2015; Interview, preacher at Masjid Sakina, Mombasa, Kenya, 26 November, 2015.

<sup>67</sup> Interview, preacher at Masjid Sakina, Mombasa, Kenya, 26 November, 2015; Interview, executive official of National Muslims Leadership Forum (NAMLEF), 7 April 2016; Interview, Quranic-school teacher, Eastleigh,

Muslim human rights activist based in Mombasa aptly put it, “many who could not quote al-Buhari could, for instance, talk about the [American] invasion of Iraq.”<sup>68</sup> In this way, speakers seemed to be dedicating much of their attention in articulating an Islamic political vision in Kenya; rather than conducting abstruse theological ruminations that are usually settled by reciting the *Hadith* in Arabic, as was the case with most educated Islamic reformers before 1990. Instead, these ‘new’ thematic concerns – which drew parallels between Kenyan Muslim grievances and issues affecting Muslims elsewhere – appeared to provide a widely accessible narrative of international injustice.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time, an increased use of the Internet and Cable Television coincided with the arrival of preachers from elsewhere in the Muslim world, especially from the Middle-East, Somalia and Tanzania, and a labour migration of Kenyans into the Gulf States.<sup>70</sup> The imagined international community of Muslims was concretized in the minds of many Kenyan Muslims through these technological advances and migratory movements.<sup>71</sup> Speakers were becoming explicitly radical and increasingly anti-American, with films, photographs, and tapes of recorded speeches appearing on the streets of major urban centers in Kenya that were encouraging Kenyan Muslims to see themselves as part of a global struggle.<sup>72</sup> While some of the material that was being circulated through these new channels did not glorify violence, some of it did, as more attention was given to global currents.<sup>73</sup> Despite striking a chord with common sentiments in Kenya that viewed Islamism as having non-Kenyan roots, Moustapha Hassouna, who was once a lecturer of security studies at the University of Nairobi, offered a more nuanced understanding of the changing trends in Muslim activism during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Speaking to a reporter for the *Christian Science Monitor* in 2002, Hassouna stated that “Kenyans do not have the wherewithal, nor the character, to start up their own homegrown international terror organization, but [Kenyan] Muslims are becoming more ‘radical or political in their outlook, and I can see their sympathies being used by outside terror interests.’”<sup>74</sup> A preacher at Masjid Sakina in Mombasa added, that “during that time [1998-2002] imams begun preaching about injustices done to their brothers in Afghanistan and Palestine...[...] I was young, but I remember watching those CNN reports on the Middle-East, and the bombs, and we thought this was all because those countries were Muslim.”<sup>75</sup> Asked whether Islamist ideas had gained traction in Muslim-dominated neighborhoods in the early

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Nairobi, Kenya, 15 September 2015; Interview, official of Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), Mombasa, Kenya, 24 November, 2015.

<sup>68</sup> Interview, 2 Human Rights activists, Mombasa, Kenya, 8 June 2016.

<sup>69</sup> International Crisis Group, ‘Kenyan Somali Islamist Radicalization’ (Africa Briefing, ICG, Brussels, January 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Interview, 2 Human Rights activists, Mombasa, Kenya, 8 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighborhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016.

<sup>71</sup> Interview, executive official of National Muslims Leadership Forum (NAMLEF), 7 April 2016; Interview, official of Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), Mombasa, Kenya, 24 November, 2015.

<sup>72</sup> FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; Danna Harman, ‘Why radicals find fertile ground in moderate Kenya; president Bush met with president Moi to discuss security issues’, Mwakimako and Willis, *Islam, politics, and violence*. p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Interview, 2 Human Rights activists, Mombasa, Kenya, 8 June 2016.

<sup>74</sup> *The Christian Science Monitor*, 6 December 2002, < <https://www.questia.com/newspaper/1P2-32599687/why-radicals-find-fertile-ground-in-moderate-kenya> > (16 February 2016).

<sup>75</sup> Interview, preacher at Masjid Sakina, Mombasa, Kenya, 26 November, 2015.

2000s, a Muslim rights activist responded as follows, “when the Islamist ideology was introduced to mostly urban, Muslim-dominated and poor neighborhoods, it really took off and gained traction with the locals because of its religious posturing. Most youth may not have understood the ideology but they saw themselves as part of a bigger community. They got carried away very fast”.<sup>76</sup> It was these trends, amongst others discussed below, that would come to provide the ideological infrastructure for the manifestation of an Islamist ideology in the decade that followed.<sup>77</sup>

*Responses to Muslim activism by the state and the wider Christian public*

The debate, regarding whether to advance Muslim interests in Kenya through formal political channels or to seek redress through violent and/or non-violent transnational strategies, dominated Muslim politics in Kenya in the years after the demise of the IPK – during which Kenya’s long constitutional review process (between 2000 and 2010) took place. It was during this time that a section of the Christian clergy and Muslim leaders were also divided, especially over the issue of the legal recognition of Kadhis’ courts within Kenyan law.<sup>78</sup> Parallel to the latter was the inauguration of a new security regime aimed at countering the threat of terrorism, a development that would come to dominate Muslim-state relations for much of the period after two suicide bombings by a local cell of Al-Qaeda (in 1998 and 2002) that led to destruction of property at locally unprecedented levels, including the loss of over 200 lives.<sup>79</sup> The sum effect of these trends – state responses to terrorism and Christian public reactions to Muslim activism – was a hardening of the differences in Muslim public opinion that had begun taking shape in the late 1990s as discussed above. The result was the creation of a suitable discursive environment for the articulation of an Islamist ideology, which emerged to seek wider relevance within Kenya’s ongoing internal struggles, especially those that involved the future political direction of Kenyan Muslims.

After the investigations and subsequent court hearings that followed the Al-Qaeda attacks in Kenya revealed that Kenyan nationals were involved, an alliance emerged, between the interests of Kenyan political elites and those of Western governments, in countering the threat of ‘global terrorism’.<sup>80</sup> Western funding was used to build the physical infrastructure for countering terrorism in Kenya, but the nature in which the Kenyan government implemented its counter-terrorist policies was perceived by a majority of the respondents as the latest example of state hostility

<sup>76</sup> Interview, Muslim rights activist, Nairobi, Kenya, 13 September 2016.

<sup>77</sup> Interview, 2 Al-Shabaab analysts who worked for the U.N Monitoring Group, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 April 2016; Interview, 3 conflict analysts at the International Crisis Group, Nairobi, Kenya, 8 March 2016; Interview, Islamic preacher, Mombasa, 15 November 2015; Mwakimako and Willis, *Islam, politics, and violence*. p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Abdulkader Tayoub, Kadhis’ Courts in Kenya’s constitutional review (1998-2010): a changing approach to politics and state amongst Kenya’s Muslim leaders, *Islamic Africa* 4, 1, (2013), pp. 103-124.

<sup>79</sup> Prestholdt, ‘Kenya, the United States, and Counterterrorism’.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

towards Muslim activism, a hostility that had origins in the decolonization period.<sup>81</sup> In this way, common perceptions regarding Kenya's minority Muslim population that view them as 'outsiders' were entwined with real policy responses to countering terrorism. Following from this precedent, arbitrary and mass scale arrests would be conducted in Muslim dominated neighbourhoods of Mombasa and Nairobi, including the rendition of terrorism suspects, most of whom were Somali, Arab and Swahili, to foreign countries.<sup>82</sup> The result, according to a long-time resident of the Muslim-dominated neighbourhood of Majengo in Mombasa, is that "we don't trust anyone, not the government, not the police, not outsiders".<sup>83</sup> Despite this, the conceptualisation of Islamist violence as extrinsic to Kenyan politics proceeded to influencing dominant state perspectives regarding the presence of Somali refugees, and as a result, the government has continued to invoke threats to national security while threatening to close-down refugee camps – threats that would nonetheless be softened with pledges for more funding by Western governments.<sup>84</sup> The sum of these policy actions – all of which were aimed at salvaging Kenya's international image by presenting the problem of Islamist violence as distinctively non-Kenyan – came when Kenya decided to intervene militarily in Southern Somalia in late 2011.<sup>85</sup>

The spectre of international terrorism, best symbolised by the 11 September 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks in the United States, did not only entrench state suspicions towards Muslim activism in Kenya, but it also contributed to a number of developments that would come to draw a wedge between a section of the Christian clergy and Muslim leaders: a wedge that would be written on the canvas of constitutional review between 2000 and 2010.<sup>86</sup> The bone of contention was the inclusion of the Kadhis' Courts in what would become a new constitution of Kenya. The courts had emerged out of constitutional concessions made to supporters of 'coastal autonomy' at the dawn of Kenya's independence, and had existed since then as part of the Judiciary so as to adjudicate on Islamic Law of personal status when it comes to issues of marriage, divorce and inheritance involving parties that both profess the Islamic religion.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, when Muslim leaders, preachers, and activists teamed up with members of the Christian clergy to push for constitutional reform in the late 1990s, the hope was that this would not only curtail the power of the political establishment, but that it will also allow for the reform of the Kadhis' courts; by

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<sup>81</sup> FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Pumwani, Nairobi, Kenya, 23 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Likoni, Mombasa, Kenya, 29 June 2016.

<sup>82</sup> For example, Open Society Foundation and Muslims for Human Rights, 'We're tired of taking you to the court: human rights abuses by Kenya's Anti-Terrorism Police Unit' (Open Society Foundations, New York, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> Interview, gender activist, Majengo, Mombasa, 7 September 2015.

<sup>84</sup> Lind, Mutahi and Oosterom, 'Killing a mosquito', p. 121.

<sup>85</sup> International Crisis Group, 'The Kenyan Military Intervention in Somalia' (Africa Report, ICG, February, 2012).

<sup>86</sup> Hassan Mwakimako, Christian-Muslim relations in Kenya: a catalogue of events and meanings, *Islam and Christian-Muslim relations* 18, 2, (2007), pp. 287-307.

<sup>87</sup> Hassan Mwakimako, The historical development of Muslim courts: the Kadhi, Mudir and Liwali courts and the civil procedure code and criminal procedure ordinance, *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, 2, (2011), pp. 329-343.

expanding their mandate, standardizing their procedures and modernizing their practice.<sup>88</sup> However, after the first constitutional report by the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission (CKRC) enhanced the position of the Kadhis' courts – by expanding their mandate to include small commercial claims between Muslims, and providing for a Kadhis' court of appeal – a group of about 40 evangelical and Pentecostal churches calling itself the 'Kenya Church' contested the status enjoyed by the Kadhis' courts in the constitution.<sup>89</sup> These Christian leaders articulated a set of interrelated claims: that it was unfair for Christian taxpayers to pay for the courts, that the courts privileged Islam over other religions, that they were the first step into introducing an Islamic state in Kenya.<sup>90</sup>

Despite the fact that the Kadhis courts were eventually enshrined in the 2010 constitution, which had received the popular vote at a referendum during the same year, the opposition to the Kadhis courts by a broad-section of the Christian leadership was consistent throughout the two rounds of constitutional review, i.e. 2000-2005 and 2009-2010. As illustrated by observers of this debate, such as Hassan Mwakimako and Anne Cussac, the Kadhis' courts controversy degenerated into a flurry of accusations and rumour, reflecting the fears, rather than objectivity, of most of its main protagonists.<sup>91</sup> Routinely mentioned was the threat of international terrorism, and perhaps, fear of what some saw as an Islamic resurgence in Kenya and beyond.<sup>92</sup> But to most Muslim leaders, this debate was a manifestation of a wider 'Pentecostalisation' of Kenyan society, through which Christian religious symbols, imagery, and language were rapidly entering the domain of public life.<sup>93</sup> This form of Christianity – an overtly depoliticised Christian Pentecostal culture that largely focuses on a theology of personal transformation – was quickly replacing the culture of political activism that had marked the established churches (mainly Catholic and Protestant) in the 1990s.<sup>94</sup> Instead, the emerging public hostility to Islam by evangelical and Pentecostal churches was entwined with the churches' close involvement in the reproduction of the political order, steeped in its ethos of patronage and the open display of the material trappings of success as a reward for faith.<sup>95</sup> In this way, Christianity in general was becoming closely associated with the dominant political culture of the state, while Islam would come to provide the language for opposing the

<sup>88</sup> Interview, a Kadhi in Wajir county, 21 April 2016; Interview, executive official of NAMLEF, 7 April 2016; Interview, official of Council of Imams and Preachers of Kenya (CIPK), Mombasa, Kenya, 24 November, 2015; Tayoub, 'Kadhis' Courts', p. 121;

<sup>89</sup> Anne Cussac, Muslims and Politics in Kenya: the issue of the Kadhis' courts in the constitution review process, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 28, 2, (2008), pp. 289-302.

<sup>90</sup> Kahumbi Maina, 'Islamophobia amongst Christians and its challenge in entrenchment of Kadhis' courts, in Abdulkader Tayob and Joseph Wandera (eds), *Constitutional review in Kenya and Kadhis' courts: selected papers collected at the workshop 20 March 2010* (Centre for Contemporary Islam, Cape Town, 2011), pp. 49-55.

<sup>91</sup> Cussac, 'Muslims and Politics in Kenya'; Mwakimako, 'Christian-Muslim relations in Kenya'.

<sup>92</sup> Interview, Quranic-school teacher, Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya, 15 September 2015; Interview, Christian Reverend, Nyali, Mombasa, Kenya, 17 September 2015.

<sup>93</sup> Interview, Quranic-school teacher, Eastleigh, Nairobi, Kenya, 15 September 2015; Paul Gifford, *Christianity, politics and public life in Kenya* (Columbia University Press, New York); Tayob, 'Kadhis' Courts', p. 111.

<sup>94</sup> Deacon, *et.al*, 'Preaching politics', pp. 2.

<sup>95</sup> Deacon, *et.al*, 'Preaching politics', pp. 6.



status-quo, especially in articulating coastal and Somali grievances against the government.<sup>96</sup> Perhaps most significantly, the Kadhis courts debate came to complicate struggles within the Muslim community for finding a common voice towards the redressing of Muslim grievances.

In fact, a group of Muslim activists depicted the Kadhis' courts debate and the experience of counter-terrorism as local examples of Muslim victimization; which increased their skepticism of the idea that Muslim interests could be advanced through formal political processes.<sup>97</sup> Aboud Rogo Mohamed (1968-2012), a leading IPK activist in the 1990s – he was arrested, charged and acquitted in connection to the 28 November 2002 suicide attack – quickly emerged as the ideological leader of the latter group of activists.<sup>98</sup> From 2005, after his acquittal, Rogo attempted, with considerable success, to mobilize Muslim public opinion against Muslim politicians, religious leaders and scholars who were enthusiastic about constitutionalism, elections and democracy as a means of promoting Muslim interests.<sup>99</sup> Issuing a sermon during the Eid celebrations of 2006 at Tononoka grounds in Mombasa, Rogo stated that “the role of Muslims is to follow the example of the Prophet...[...] The *Sunnah* will not be complete if Muslims in Kenya will not join the defensive Jihad that is being wedged by our brothers and sisters in Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine.”<sup>100</sup> Other preachers, such as Samir Khan (1971-2012), who, like Rogo, preached in the Majengo neighborhood of Mombasa; Hassaan Mahad Omar (1979-present), who preached in the Eastleigh neighborhood of Nairobi; and Ahmed Iman Ali (1972-present), who preached at the Pumwani Riyadhha Mosque neighboring Eastleigh, followed Rogo in drawing parallels between Kenyan Muslim grievances and global trends affecting the Muslim public.

These activists cum preachers produced and circulated their own alternative sources of information, through newsletters such as the defunct ‘Al-Misbah’ that was published by the Muslim Youth Center based at the relatively wealthier Pumwani Riyadhha mosque, and its successor publication ‘Gaidi Mtaani’, an online magazine published by Al-Shabaab’s media division but dedicated to a Kenyan audience.<sup>101</sup> Their speeches, recorded on tape, DvD’s, and posted on YouTube, received faster and wider levels of circulation than would have been possible in the early to mid-1990s.<sup>102</sup> In addition to the use of this alternative multi-media platform, they used rents gathered from mosque property, especially from the Pumwani Riyadhha mosque, to fund

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Mwakimako and Willis, ‘Islam and democracy’, p. 30.

<sup>98</sup> Kadara Swaleh, ‘The radicalization of Sheikh Aboud Rogo and the formation of a jihadist ideology in coastal Kenya’ (Paper presented at the conference on ‘Pirates and Preachers’, Roskilde University, May 2014); Hassan Ndlovu, ‘The prospects of Islamism in Kenya as epitomized by Shaykh Aboud Rogo’s sermons,’ *The Annual Review of Islam in Africa* 12, 2 (2013), pp. 7-12.

<sup>99</sup> For example, Al-Wahyein Alikhbaar, ‘Eid-Khutba 2006: Sheikh Aboud Rogo; *YouTube*, 2 February 2013 < [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cSFEu6T\\_jM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-cSFEu6T_jM)> (4 August 2017).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> U.N., ‘Letter dated 18 July 2011’, pp. 143.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

their trips in other mosques in Nairobi, on the coast, and further up-country.<sup>103</sup> During sermons, a central discursive thread involved the location of religious justifications for Muslim disengagement with the formal political process and engagement in religious military struggle.<sup>104</sup> The preachers invoked the ideas of Mawdoodi and Qutb, who argued that since Sharia is complete law, no further legislation is possible, and therefore, there was no need for an elected legislature.<sup>105</sup>

During ‘training’ lectures given to youth who responded favorably to the sermons, material evoking images of the global Muslim condition of oppression – the conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Yemen – was provided, including profiles of Islamist clerics and their ideologies.<sup>106</sup> They also invoked tenets widely considered central to Wahhabi Islam, such as *al-wala' wal-bara'*, or loyalty to Muslims and disavowal of non-Muslims. Inspired by popular Al-Qaeda Islamists such as Anwar Awlaki (1971-2011), they simplified common understandings of contemporary global conflicts affecting Muslims by dividing the world into black and white.<sup>107</sup> This powerful distinction, between *dar al-Islam*, or the abode of Islam, and *dar al-Harb*, or the abode of non-belief, communicated the idea that the underlying motivation for the current aggression experienced by Kenyan Muslims (and Muslims elsewhere in the world) was not secular, rather, it was motivated primarily by anti-Islamic forces that seek the annihilation of Islam as a world religion.<sup>108</sup> A case in point includes video footage (currently deleted from the internet) by a contingent of Kenyan fighters with Al-Shabaab that attacked a number of towns and villages in Lamu county across the Kenya-Somalia border in June-July 2015. In the video, an attempt to carefully package coastal and Somali grievances against the Kenyan state as evidence of a systematic alienation of Muslim interests in Kenya was made.<sup>109</sup> In particular, reference was made to state responses to an insurgency in Northeast Kenya in the 1960s commonly known as *Shifta*; the perceived loss of coastal (described in the video as Muslim) land to Christian ‘outsiders’; the

<sup>103</sup> Interview, imam at Pumwani Riyadhha Mosque, Nairobi, Kenya, 21 May 2016; Interview, resident of Pumwani, Nairobi, 20 May 2016; Interview, Wajir county government official, 19 April 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Majengo, Mombasa, Kenya, 30 June 2016; FGD, 10 participants from the neighbourhood of Pumwani, Nairobi, Kenya, 23 June 2016.

<sup>104</sup> For example, *Gaidi Mtaani* issue 9, ‘Ole! Kwa wanazuoni waovu – Jihad is the answer’, 5 September 2017, <<http://jihadology.net/category/gaidi-mtaani/>> (28 February 2017); *Gaidi Mtaani* issue 1, ‘Operation Linda Uislamu’, 5 April 2012, <<http://jihadology.net/2012/04/05/issue-1-of-a-new-Swahili-magazine-gaidi-mtaani/>> (28 February 2017); Fanah Abu Zinnirah, ‘Jihaad katika misingi ya Quran na Sunnah,’ 20 October 2009 <<https://archive.org/details/JihaadKatikaMisingiYaQuraanNaSunnah>> (13 March, 2017).

<sup>105</sup> Mwakimako and Willis, ‘Islam and democracy’, p. 21.

<sup>106</sup> UN Security Council, ‘Al Shabaab as a regional’ pp. 143.

<sup>107</sup> For example, *Al-Misbah*, ‘Why calamities and destructions are happening to Muslims’, 9 October 2009, pp. 1; *Al-Misbah*, ‘Fighting against government armies in the Muslim world’, 23 October 2009, pp. 1; *Al-Misbah*, ‘44 ways of supporting Jihad,’ 6 November 2009, pp. 2; *Gaidi Mtaani* issue 4, ‘Special Edition – Westgate’, 12 November 2013 <<http://jihadology.net/2013/11/12/new-issue-of-the-magazine-gaidi-mtaani-issue-4/>> (2 March 2018).

<sup>108</sup> For example, *Gaidi Mtaani*, ‘Operation Linda Uislamu’, pp. 1; *Gaidi Mtaani* issue 7, ‘May our mothers be bereaved of us shall we fail to avenge our prophet,’ 27 February 2015 <<http://jihadology.net/2015/02/27/new-issue-of-the-magazine-gaidi-mtaani-issue-7/>> (2 March 2018); *Hizb ut Tahrir*, ‘Press release – Has not the anti-terrorism law meant to combat Islam?’ 26 September 2016 <<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/press-releases/kenyaa/11445.html>> (2 March 2018).

<sup>109</sup> David Anderson, ‘Why Mpeketoni matters: al-Shabaab and violence in Kenya,’ (Policy Brief, Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center, 2014).

alleged state ‘massacres’ of Kenyan Somalis in the Northeast region in the 1980s; the arrests, alleged torture, and unresolved murders of Muslim clerics; and a 2014 security operation in the Nairobi neighborhood of Eastleigh dominated by Somalis that was reportedly marked by serious human rights violations.<sup>110</sup> In sum, through such simplifying, and yet productive language, Kenyan Islamists were proposing their own solution to the Muslim predicament: the establishment of an Islamic state through which Islam would end its widely perceived marginality, and where ‘proper’ Islamic practice would be enforced through the strict adoption of Sharia Law.<sup>111</sup>

However, most of Kenya’s leading purveyors of a violent Islamist ideology, including Aboud Rogo, were murdered between 2012 and 2014 in a series of targeted killings – or as part of what is widely believed to have been an operation carried out by state security agents – after which the administration led swoops into the mosques the preachers had exercised control, and later supervised the selection of new mosque committees.<sup>112</sup> The motivations for participating in Islamist violence by these individuals has been the subject of intense debate amongst scholars who have examined a host of socio-economic conditions and psychosocial factors.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, a number of studies have found that reasons for joining Islamist movements are diverse and varied, and that ideology alone might not offer substantial explanations for involvement in Islamist violence.<sup>114</sup> Despite this observation, it is important to note that Islamist movements invest heavily in presenting themselves as driven primarily by Islamist objectives, and that this is crucial to their recruitment strategies. Stig Jarle Hansen, in his examination of Al-Shabaab recruitment strategies in Somalia, submitted that motives for joining Al-Shabaab are more often than not highly varied, but that they usually include a quest for justice through Sharia legislation, and an idea of ‘defensive or offensive jihad.’<sup>115</sup> This way of understanding the world is itself empowering. Membership can be compared to a conversion process, which can be considered a central benefit – more than access to material resources – of participating in ‘jihad movements’.

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<sup>110</sup> Author Reference, ‘Countering Al-Shabaab’s narrative in Kenya’s fight against extremism,’ *All Africa Blog*, 14 April 2015 <http://allafrica.com/stories/201504160257.html> (15 March 2017).

<sup>111</sup> For example, *Hizb ut Tahrir*, ‘Press release – The ongoing oppression against Muslims will persist till the reestablishment of Khilafah,’ 18 November 2014 <<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/press-releases/kenyaa/6342.html>> (2 March 2018); *Hizb ut Tahrir*, ‘Press release - Oh! You Heads of State you cannot solve the refugee crisis: only the Khilafah “Caliphate” will provide the long-term solution urgently needed’, 26 March 2017 <<http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/en/index.php/press-releases/kenyaa/12752.html>> (2 March 2018).

<sup>112</sup> *BBC News*, ‘Kenya Terror Charges After Mombasa Police Raid Mosque’, 3 February 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-26013964> (21 March 2018); *Business Daily*, ‘251 Arrested, Grenades Found in Mombasa Mosques’, 17 November 2014 <<http://www.businessdailyafrica.com/Police-raid-Mombasa-mosques--arrest-251-youth/-/539546/2524972/-/bf1qn9/-/index.html>> (21 March 2015).

<sup>113</sup> Botha, ‘Political socialization’.

<sup>114</sup> Khalil and Zuethen, ‘Countering violent extremism’, p. 1.

<sup>115</sup> Stig Jarle Hansen, *Al-Shabaab in Somalia: The history and ideology of a militant Islamist group* (Hurst, London, U.K, 2013), p. 45.

## Conclusion

Since 2014, open invocations of Islamist ideas in public have reduced in Kenya, in fact, they have almost ground to a halt. But this has been accompanied by an increased use of digital media for the articulation of an Islamist ideology and expressions of support for Islamist violence.<sup>116</sup> Through these channels, Kenyan Islamists have not only attempted to continue to mobilize their co-nationals for the purposes of waging Islamist violence, but they have also continued to pay attention to Kenyan political struggles, inserting, as they have always done, an Islamist ideology within Kenya's public discourse.<sup>117</sup>

Existing analytical frameworks, which focus on the combination of socioeconomic conditions and psychosocial factors so as to understand why certain individuals perpetrate ideologically inspired forms of violence are important, but the historical evolution, and the continued salience of an Islamist ideology in Kenya's public discourse requires a distinct examination, as has been exemplified in this article. The example of Kenya has shown that Islamist ideologies are inspired, both by the rise of a global narrative of Muslim victimization, especially since the 1990s, and by local Muslim experiences. In particular, the intellectual genealogies of an Islamist ideology in Kenya are found within contending visions amongst Kenyan Muslims regarding how to address the Muslim condition in a Christian dominated country.

At the center of this article's main argument is that Islamist politics, despite the violence that they propagate, are in Kenya (and beyond), not an aberration to Muslim politics, but are part of the main strands of Islamic political thought since the twentieth century. In sum, Islamism arises out of internal debates amongst the Muslim public regarding the public good and civic virtue, including how to advance Muslim interests more widely. However, the article submits that the latter is not enough, and that divisions amongst Kenyan Muslims regarding the prospects of their future political direction have been worsened by responses to Muslim activism by the state and the wider Christian public. The article has shown that through the growth of Pentecostal hostility to Islam, as shown through the Kadhis' courts debate, and the inauguration of a counter-terrorist strategy that entwines with common perceptions that regard Muslims as 'outsiders', an Islamist ideology with historical antecedents in the 1990s and before has emerged; and has since sought for itself wider relevance within Kenya's public discourse. Following from these observations, the conclusion is that Islamist politics – in Kenya and elsewhere – are more often than not the result of local histories as much as they are part of a global Muslim 'victimization' narrative.

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<sup>116</sup> Interview, 2 Al-Shabaab analysts who worked for the U.N Monitoring Group, Nairobi, Kenya, 25 April 2016.

<sup>117</sup> Zahed Amanullah and Anisa Harrasy, 2017, *Between two extremes: responding to Islamist and tribalist messaging online in Kenya during the 2017 elections*, (Institute of Strategic Dialogue: London).

